MARVEL COMICS
DEC
#4
HEROES REBORN
THE RETURN PART 4 OF 4
THE CATACLYSMIC CONCLUSION...
DAVID
LARROCA
HANNA
...THAT WILL CHANGE THE LIVES OF MARVEL'S HEROES FOREVER!
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STAN LEE PRESENTS:
HEROES REBORN
THE RETURN PART 4 OF 4
FOURTH & GOAL
IN ANOTHER UNIVERSE THAT MIRRORS OUR OWN...
IT HAS TAKEN CAJOLING... AND EXPLAINING... AND DEMONSTRATIONS...
...MUCH POINTING TO THE SKY, MUCH EFFORT, MUCH FAST TALKING, MUCH CALLING IN OF FAVORS, CASHING IN OF CHIPS, GENTLE AND LESS GENTLE PERSUASION...
YEAH... YEAH, I THINK THAT'S EVERYBODY...
YOU THINK THAT'S EVERYBODY?
Oh, I'VE GOT A BAD FEELING ABOUT THIS.
...IN SHORT, IT MAY BE THE SINGLE GREATEST EFFORT EXERTED SINCE THE CREATION OF THE WORLD.
THE GOAL? THE POSSIBLE SALVATION OF SAME.
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THE BAXTER BUILDING, NEW YORK CITY -- IN THE LAB OF SCIENTIST REED RICHARDS...
YOU'RE THE MAN OF THE HOUR, VICTOR VON DOOM. ALL THOSE PEOPLE ON THE ROOF WOULDN'T HAVE A PRAYER IF YOU HADN'T PREPARED AN ESCAPE VESSEL.
NO GOOD DEED GOES UNPUNISHED. IS THAT NOT THE SAYING, RICHARDS?
FROM MY UNDERSTANDING, THE WORLD THAT AWAITS ME IS A PALE SHADE COMPARED TO WHAT I HAVE HERE.
THERE IS NO ALLURE TO DEPARTING THIS ONE... AND YET IT SEEMS INEVITABLE. MANDATORY.
WHAT OF YOU, TONY STARK? IS IT NOT GALLING TO HURL YOURSELF INTO THE UNKNOWN...
...WHEN YOU HAVE ALL A MAN COULD WISH FOR?
YES. BUT... IT WOULD SEEM THE ONLY WAY, RIGHT, BRUCE?
YES, IT WOULD. BUT PERHAPS WE NEED NOT DISSOLVE OUR ALLIANCE IN THE NEW... OLD... WORLD.
PERHAPS WE CAN PRESERVE WHAT WE HAVE HERE. AND IF WE CAN'T, FOR WHATEVER REASON...
...THEN AT LEAST THE ATOMIC KNIGHTS WENT OUT IN STYLE, SAVING A WORLD.

ON A ROOFTOP ACROSS TOWN...
YOU... YOU GOTTA BE KIDDING!
YOU'RE JUST... LEAVING ME BEHIND? YOU'RE GOING SOMEWHERE, TAKING FALCON AND NOT ME? THIS BITES!
THERE ARE WEIRD FLAMING EYES IN THE SKY, EVERYBODY'S TALKIN' DOOMSDAY... AND YOU AND BIRDBRAIN ARE OFF ON A SECRET MISSION? CAP, PLEASE, WHY CAN'T I COME?!
THE ANSWERS RACE THROUGH HIS MIND: "BECAUSE SAM AND I AREN'T FROM THIS WORLD... BECAUSE YOU'RE... A MANIFESTATION OF A YOUNG BOY'S IMAGINATION, MADE MANIFEST BY AN INCOMPREHENSIBLE POWER."
"BECAUSE..."
YOU JUST... CAN'T. I'M SORRY.
TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF, BUCKY.
YEAH.
WHATEVER.

BACK AT F.F H.Q.
I SEE CAP AND THE FALCON. THEY'RE ON THEIR WAY...
GOOD. THAT WILL ACCOUNT FOR EVERYONE -- SUE?
YES.
BUT NOW... ASHEMA... I THINK IT IMPORTANT WE INFORM YOU...
...THAT WE'RE NOT JUST UP-AND-LEAVING AS EASILY AS THAT.
IMPOSSIBLE. FRANKLIN HAS CHOSEN THIS WORLD FOR OBLITERATION. AS ONE GROUP YOU ARRIVED IN THIS WORLD FROM YOUR OWN, AND AS ONE GROUP YOU MUST DEPART. AND NOW. OTHERWISE THE CELESTIALS WILL OBLITERATE BOTH WORLDS.
ONCE YOU'VE RETURNED, FRANKLIN WILL THEN COME WITH ME TO MEET HIS TRUE DESTINY.
I CAN REMOVE HIM FROM YOUR MEMORIES, IF YOU WISH, TO EASE THE STING OF DEPARTURE...
NO! I WON'T LET YOU --
NONE OF US WILL. REED RICHARDS SPEAKS FOR US ALL.
THIS WORLD -- "FICTION" OR NOT -- MUST BE PRESERVED. AND THE BOY WILL STAY WITH HIS PARENTS/ SO SAY WE ALL.
NEVER HAVE THE HEROES BEEN AS CLOSE TO DEATH AS THEY ARE AT THIS MOMENT.

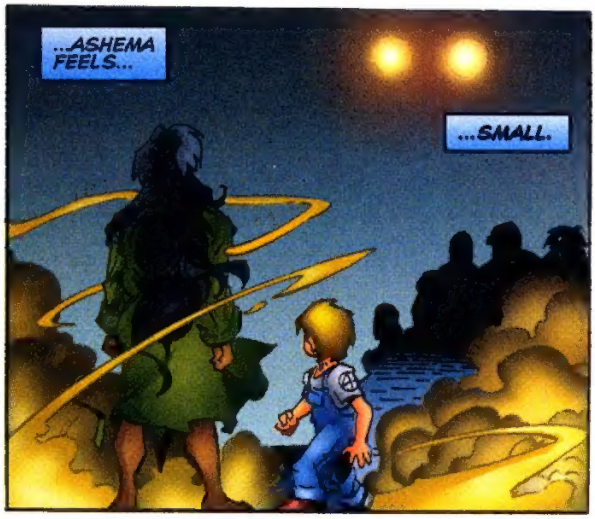
BUT AT THAT MOMENT... WE FIND DOCTOR STRANGE IN A PLACE THAT IS... AND ISN'T.
YOU ARE MY LAST HOPE. THE LAST HOPE OF ALL OF US. I HAVE APPROACHED YOU IN TIMES PAST, AND YOU HAVE REFUSED TO HELP -- EVEN THOUGH I HAVE AIDED YOU.
A BEING SUCH AS YOURSELF IS ABOVE NOTIONS OF GRATITUDE... BUT I AM NOT. WHATEVER YOU CAN DO... IF ANYTHING... PLEASE... GRANT ME THAT... BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE.
WE SHALL... CONSIDER IT. HOWEVER... LEAVE US THE GLOBE...
I HAVE DONE ALL I CAN. NOW IT'S UP TO THE REST OF THEM.

YOU... YOU MICROBES WITH PRETENSIONS OF SIGNIFICANCE!
I AM A CELESTIAL! I COULD OBLITERATE YOU WITH A THOUGHT, AND YOU DEFY ME?!

I COULD...

AND HE LOOKS AT HER... JUST... LOOKS AT HER...
...AND IN HIS EYES... AND IN THE EYES OF HER PEERS... FOR THE FIRST TIME IN HER ENDLESS EXISTENCE...

VERY WELL.
IF ALL OF YOU... WITH YOUR DISPARATE PERSONALITIES... CAN COME TOGETHER FOR A GREATER PURPOSE... THEN I WILL HONOR THAT. GO... AND THIS WORLD WILL LIVE ON.
YOU HAVE MY WORD.

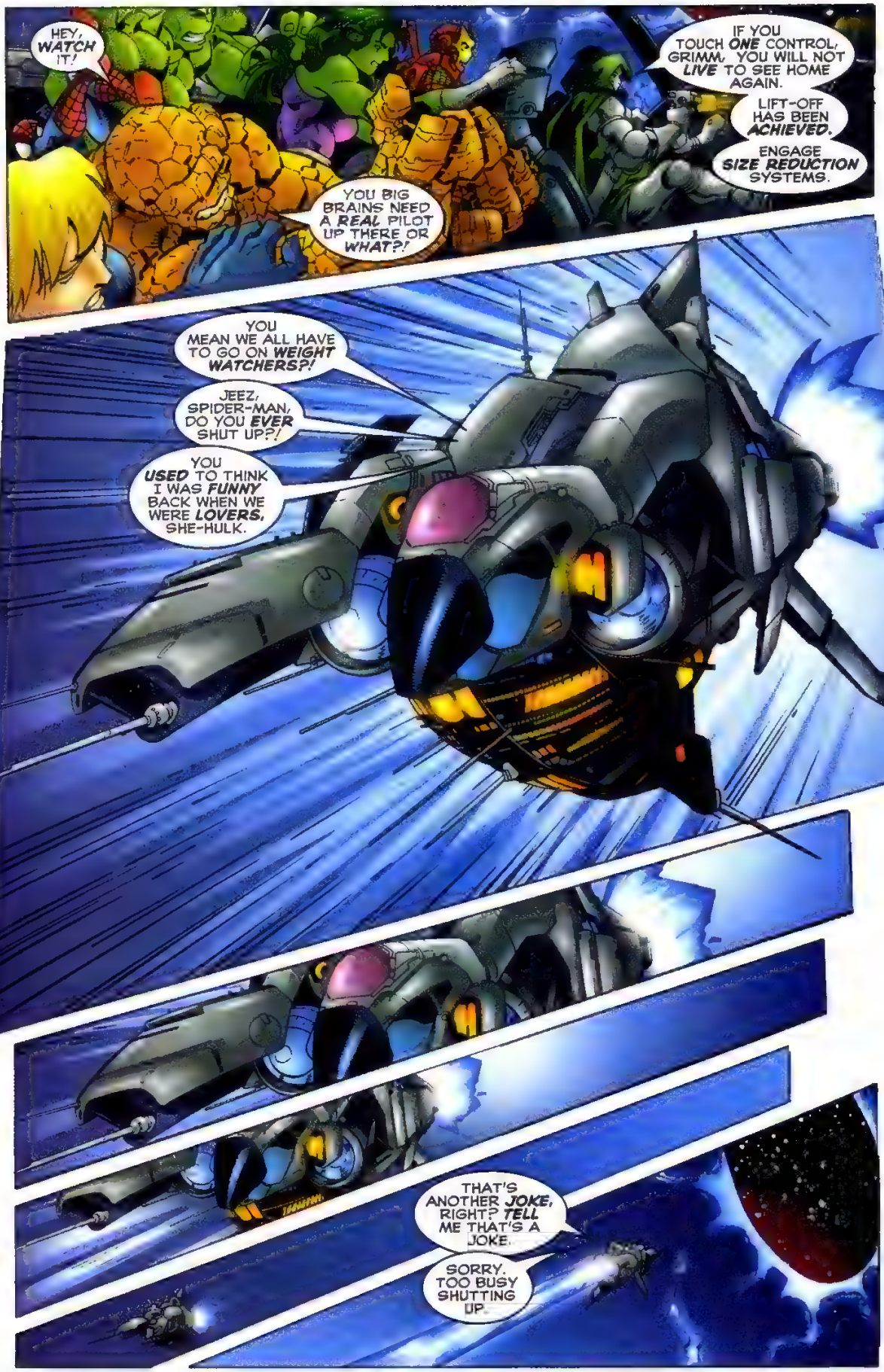

...ASHEMA FEELS...
...SMALL.

THY WORD. AND WHAT REASON DO WE HAVE TO TRUST THAT?
I HAVE NO PURPOSE IN LYING.
PERHAPS. OR PERHAPS YOU FEAR OUR POWER AND WRATH!
SNAP
OR... PERHAPS NOT.
YOU WILL ALL LEAVE. NONE MUST REMAIN IN THIS SPHERE, OR ALL WILL PERISH. THOSE ARE THE TERMS. UNDERSTOOD?
GOOD.
BY THE WAY, WHERE'D TONY GO?
SOME LAST MINUTE BUSINESS, HE SAID.

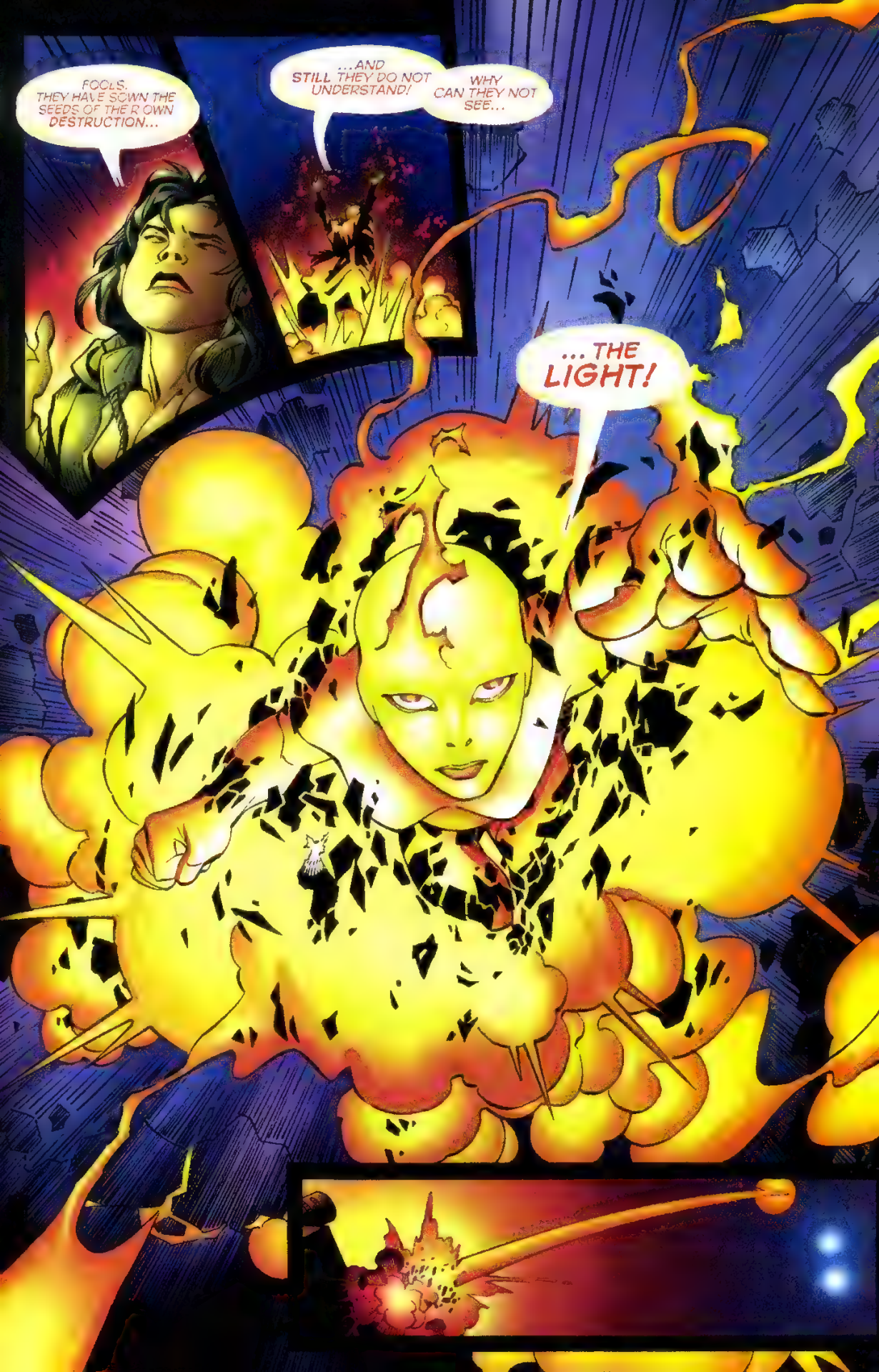
TONY...
...DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW GREAT THAT WAS? AFTER ALL THIS TIME, I STILL --
-- TONY WHY ARE YOU --?
-- WHY ARE YOU WEARING THE IRON MAN COSTUME? AND WHY DO YOU LOOK... SO SAD?
I'M... NOT. I'M JUST THINKING ABOUT WHAT A... NICE APARTMENT YOU HAVE HERE, AND I...
... AND THERE'S THINGS I WANTED TO SAY... BUT THIS ISN'T HOW I INTENDED TO...
TO SAY WHAT? THAT YOU LOVE ME?
YES.
TAKE CARE, PEPPER.
Uhm... Uh... YOU TOO.
SEE YOU LATER, RIGHT?
RIGHT?

A COMING DISASTER BROUGHT ON BY GOD-LIKE BEINGS, AND AN ESCAPE IN A MASSIVE ARK. DOES ANY OF THIS SEEM FAMILIAR TO YOU, SPIDER-MAN?
I GUESS YOU COULD SAY THERE'S NOAH ACCOUNTING FOR TASTE, SHE-HULK.
Aw GAWD. I WANNA SIT NEXT TO SOMEBODY ELSE.
WOW! THIS SHIP HAS EVERYTHING! COOL!
SURVIVAL ALONE IS INSUFFICIENT, LAD. ONE MUST SURVIVE...
...IN STYLE.
ASHEMA CONFIRMED THAT THE WAY HOME IS THROUGH THE NEGATIVE ZONE. IT'S NOT INFINITE -- THE OUTER BORDERS ARE, QUITE LITERALLY, THE BOUNDARIES OF FRANKLIN'S IMAGINATION.
IF WE CAN CROSS THAT "BORDER," WE CAN MAKE IT BACK. PROBLEM IS, THIS SHIP IS TOO BIG TO GET THROUGH THE PORTAL.
BUT RICHARDS AND I HAVE INCORPORATED SHRINKING TECHNOLOGY THAT HE WAS DEVELOPING TO EXPLORE AN AREA HE CALLS THE "MICROVERSE."
ALTHOUGH THE CHILD MIGHT HAVE BEEN ABLE TO SHRINK US HIMSELF. IMAGINE SUCH POWER... IN ONE SO YOUNG.

COME, GENTLEMEN. IT'S TIME. AND I HAVE TOO LITTLE TASTE FOR FLIES TO DESIRE THE TEMPTING OF FATE.
I KNOW, THOR. BUT I DISLIKE EVEN THE APPEARANCE OF RETREATING.
UNDERSTOOD, CAPTAIN. BUT IN MANY WAYS, WE ARE BUT SOLDIERS. AND WE DO WHAT MUST BE DONE...
...FOR THE BETTERMENT OF ALL.
VRRRRRRR


HEY, WATCH IT!
YOU BIG BRAINS NEED A REAL PILOT UP THERE OR WHAT?!
IF YOU TOUCH ONE CONTROL, GRIMM, YOU WILL NOT LIVE TO SEE HOME AGAIN.
LIFT-OFF HAS BEEN ACHIEVED.
ENGAGE SIZE REDUCTION SYSTEMS.
YOU MEAN WE ALL HAVE TO GO ON WEIGHT WATCHERS?!
JEEZ, SPIDER-MAN, DO YOU EVER SHUT UP?!
YOU USED TO THINK I WAS FUNNY BACK WHEN WE WERE LOVERS, SHE-HULK.
THAT'S ANOTHER JOKE, RIGHT? TELL ME THAT'S A JOKE.
SORRY. TOO BUSY SHUTTING UP.

I SEE ASHEMA! SHE'S STANDING NEXT TO THE NEGATIVE ZONE DOOR!
HEY DAD! MOM! SHE --
-- SHE SMILED AT ME!
AND THEN, WITH A ROAR OF NEGATIVE SOLAR WINDS...
...THEY'RE GONE.


FOOLS. THEY HAVE SOWN THE SEEDS OF THEIR OWN DESTRUCTION...
...AND STILL THEY DO NOT UNDERSTAND!
WHY CAN THEY NOT SEE...
...THE LIGHT!

THREE MINUTES TO THE BOUNDARY AREA. IT'S AT THAT POINT THAT OUR PREVIOUS EXPEDITION WENT AWRY.
THIS TIME WE HAVE TO BREAK THROUGH, BECAUSE -- AT LEAST IN THIS REALITY -- THAT POINT FORMS THE BORDER BETWEEN OUR WORLD... AND OUR HOME.
YOUR SON SEEMS MOST INTERESTED IN MY VESSEL'S WORKINGS. HE HAS YOUR EAGER MIND, RICHARDS.
THANK YOU, VICTOR.
WONDROUS. TO HAVE SUCH POWERS... AND YET TO MAINTAIN A CHILD-LIKE INNOCENCE.
I ENVY YOU, LAD. YES...
...I DO...

...AND WHAT DOOM ENVIES... DOOM MUST HAVE!
VON DOOM! LET HIM GO! HAVE YOU LOST YOUR MIND?!
I WOULD NOT HURT A CHILD FOR ALL THE WORLD. BUT FOR ALL THE UNIVERSE, WELL...
...COMPROMISES CAN AND MUST BE MADE!
FRANKLIN!
REED! WHAT'S HAPPENING?

WITHIN SECONDS, THE OTHERS -- ALERTED TO THE EMERGENCY -- CHARGE TOWARDS THE FRONT SECTION OF THE ARK.
BUT BE IT SEVERAL SECONDS OR EVEN ONE... IT MAKES NO DIFFERENCE...
...FOR THE EMERGENCY EXIT TUBE HAS ALREADY HURLED DOOM AND FRANKLIN INTO THE VOID.
YOU HEARD ASHEMA! WE GOTTA LEAVE THE SAME WAY WE ARRIVED -- TOGETHER! OR... OR THE CELESTIALS ARE GONNA WRECK EVERYTHING!
IF YOUR POWER IS PROPERLY HARNESSED, I CAN ATTEND TO THE CELESTIALS. AND EVEN NOW YOUR POWER IS FLOWING INTO ME VIA MY ARMOR'S CIRCUITRY, WHICH COULD HAVE DRAINED OFF THE POWER OF A HERALD TO GALACTUS HIMSELF, HAD I THE OPPORTUNITY.
THIS IS FOR THE BEST, CHILD. IT TRULY IS. ONLY ONE SUCH AS MYSELF IS WORTHY OF SUCH POWER.

"YES, INDEED, ALL FOR THE BEST. BEST FOR THE WORLD... FOR YOU... FOR ME...
"...FOR US. IN A WAY, YOU WILL BE LIKE A SON TO ME.
"THE SON... OF A GOD. WE WILL RULE THIS WORLD WITH NO INTERFERENCE FROM THOSE SUPER-POWERED GNATS.
"AND WE WILL DEFEAT THE CELESTIALS, FOR TRULY, AGAINST OUR COMBINED POWER, WHAT THREAT COULD THEY POSSIBLY POSE?"

GIVE ME BACK MY SON!
GET 'IM, DAD! KICK THE SNOT OUTTA 'IM!
YOU HAD EVERYTHING, VICTOR! YOU HAD FRIENDS... RESPECT...
AND YOU HAD LIFE, RICHARDS. BUT THOSE THINGS YOU ESPOUSE MEAN NOTHING TO ME...
...AND APPARENTLY, YOUR LIFE MEANS NOTHING TO YOU.
UNHAND HIM, VILLAIN. THIS BOY RETURNS TO HIS FATHER, AND THEY WILL RETURN HOME...
...EVEN IF IT COSTS ME MY IMMORTAL LIFE AND SOUL!

REED! REED, WE CAN'T LEAVE THOR BEHIND! HE'LL BE... HE'LL BE... AND DOOM --! WHAT ABOUT --?
WHAT OF ME? YOUR WOULD-BE HEROICS ACCOMPLISH NOTHING, THUNDER GOD. IF YOU AND I REMAIN BEHIND IN THIS SPHERE, ALL SHALL PERISH.
IF I MUST DIE TO TAKE ALL OF YOU WITH ME... THEN SO BE IT.
OR ELSE I SHALL SURVIVE TO RETURN TO OUR OTHER WORLD... AND RULE WITH NONE OF YOU TO STOP ME! EITHER WAY, THE FINAL TRIUMPH WILL BE MINE!
REED! SUSAN! WORRY NOT FOR THYSELVES OR FOR ME! ON MY HONOR, I SWEAR THAT NO HARM SHALL BEFALL YOU FROM DOOM'S MACHINATIONS!
WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!
USING MY HAMMER TO TAP INTO DIMENSIONAL ENERGIES... TO CREATE A RIFT IN-BETWEEN REALITIES, WHERE I SHALL HURL US BOTH...
...AND IF I AM TO SPEND ETERNITY THERE, BATTLING YOU TO MAINTAIN THE SAFETY OF TWO REALITIES... THEN THAT IS AN ETERNITY WELL SPENT! OR, TO USE THY OWN WORDS...
...SO BE IT!

WE GOT 'EM! THEY'RE BACK IN! BUT... WHERE'S THOR?!
HE... HE HAULED DOOM SOMEWHERE ELSE! I DON'T KNOW WHERE!
BUT THE CELESTIALS SAID WE HAD TO RETURN TOGETHER! DOOM AND THOR AREN'T BACK ON EARTH... BUT WE'RE SEPARATED! IS THAT ENOUGH TO --
TO BACK THEM OFF, THROW OFF THE BALANCE? I'D HAVE TO GIVE THAT A BIG "YES," REED! THE SHRINKING FIELD JUST WENT OFF-LINE!
THE SHRINKING FIELD IS SHUT DOWN! WE'RE GROWING OUT OF CONTROL! THE STRESS IS TEARING THE ENTIRE VESSEL APART!
IT'LL NEVER SURVIVE THE CROSSING! NEVER CRACK THROUGH THE --
THE BORDER! DEAD AHEAD! IT'S --

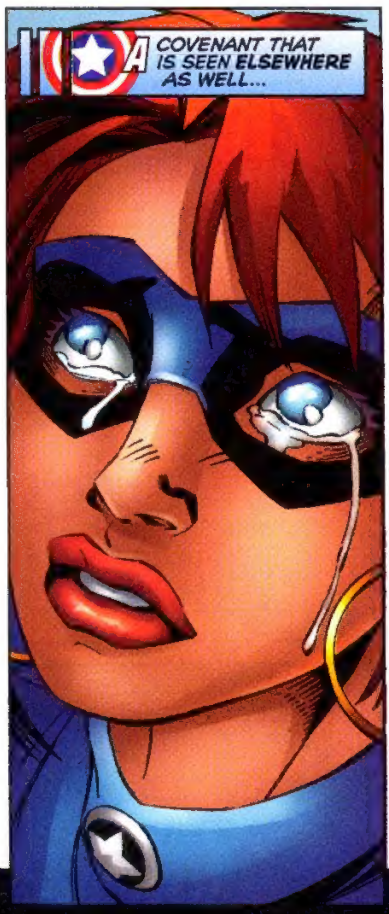
AND SUE SEES A LIFE OF WEDDED BLISS, OF HER CHILD... AND SHE IS CONTENT.
AND BRUCE SEES A LIFE OF WEDDED DISCORD, OF AN ABUSIVE FATHER, OF A YOUNG MAN ONCE CAREFREE, NOW CRIPPLED... AND HE IS STUNNED.
AND TONY SEES A LIFE OF WEAKNESS, OF JUVENILE BEHAVIOR AND DEPENDENCY... AND HE IS ANGRY.
AND STEVE SEES A LIFE OF BATTLE, OF DEDICATION, OF SERVICE TO A CAUSE... AND HE IS UNCHANGED.
THE LAST TIME THE FF APPROACHED THE BORDER THEY SAW VISIONS OF THEIR PAST LIVES. THIS TIME, ALL ABOARD EXPERIENCE THAT DISORIENTATION. THAT PLACE BETWEEN WAKEFULNESS AND DREAMS...

...AND THEN, ALL THAT THEY WERE, AND ARE, AND WILL BE...
...SHATTERS...
...AND THEY REMEMBER... EVERYTHING...

...AND THEN THEY'VE TIME FOR NOTHING ELSE... AS THE ARK SHATTERS AROUND THEIR EARS.
ENERGY CRACKLES FROM THE VERY FABRIC OF REALITY AROUND THEM, AND THEY KNOW THAT -- WITHOUT THE ARK TO WARP SPACE AROUND THEM... THEY WILL NEVER MAKE IT THROUGH.
BUT THEN THE DIMENSIONAL ENERGIES AROUND THEM SEEM TO FOCUS... TO CONCENTRATE ON ONE POINT... ONE MAN, OR ONE SET OF MEN...
...A GREEN UMBILICUS FORMS BETWEEN THEM, HAULING THEM TOWARDS ONE ANOTHER EVEN AS EACH WOULD FIGHT TO RESIST ITS PULL.

FOR MONTHS, THE HULK HAS BEEN A CHANNEL FOR THE POWER OF THE TWO UNIVERSES... A GATEWAY...
...AND NOW, THRUST INTO THE MIDST OF THE VORTEX WITH DIMENSIONAL ENERGIES CRACKLING ALL AROUND HIM, SLAMMED BACK TOGETHER AT A MOLECULAR LEVEL...
...THE FORCE OF HIS REUNION UNLEASHES THAT POWER, AND THE GATEWAY SWINGS WIDE AS A HOLE RIPS OPEN IN THE EDGE OF THE NEGATIVE ZONE.
AND WITH THE EXPLOSIVE FORCE OF AIR RUSHING TO FILL A VACUUM, THE TRAVELLERS ARE DRAWN BACK INTO THEIR HOMEWORLD, LEAPING INTO EXISTENCE ALL OVER THE WORLD...
...OR... TO PUT IT SIMPLY...

...THE HEROES... RETURN.
YOU DID NOT OBEY THE SPIRIT OF OUR AGREEMENT. WE TRUSTED YOU... AND YOU TRUSTED DOOM... AND IT WAS MISPLACED.
WHO THE DEVIL DO YOU THINK YOU ARE, Huh? YOU MADE OUR LIVES MISERABLE! YOU DISRUPTED US, TOYED WITH US!
WHO ARE YOU TO DECIDE THAT FRANKLIN HAS BEEN RUINED BY US?!
IN THE WORLD OF THE NEWLY RETURNED TRAVELLERS... THE RAIN HAS ALREADY CEASED. AND A BIBLICAL SIGN -- A COVENANT -- MAKES ITS CUSTOMARY APPEARANCE.


COVENANT THAT IS SEEN ELSEWHERE AS WELL...

...AS THE ENTIRE POPULACE OF A WORLD... SAVE FOR ONE LONELY GIRL... CELEBRATES THAT THE TERROR IS OVER, THE FRIGHTENING EYES GONE, THE FIRE ABATED.

AS FOR THE GIRL...
...IT IS AS IF A DREAM WERE OVER.

THERE IS AN APPROPRIATENESS TO THAT. INDEED, IT IS BELIEVED BY SOME THAT THE WORLD... THE ENTIRE UNIVERSE...
...MERELY EXISTS AS THE DREAM OF A SLEEPING GIANT.

THAT THE GIRL -- THAT EVERYONE AND EVERYTHING --

-- IS SIMPLY THE FIGMENT OF THE IMAGINATION OF SOME GREATER BEING'S DREAM STATE.
HER NAME IS ASHEMA, AND SHE HAS BEEN PART OF AN EXPERIMENT WITH MOST STARTLING RESULTS.

AN EXPERIMENT MADE NECESSARY BY FRANKLIN'S CREATION. FRANKLIN... A BEING WHOM THE CELESTIALS FELT WAS ON PAR WITH THEMSELVES. THEY DESIRED TO TEACH HIM, TO TEST HIM.
SO ASHEMA THE LISTENER WAS CHOSEN FOR THIS ASSIGNMENT. AN ASSIGNMENT WHICH BECAME SOMETHING... UNCONTROLLED... SOMETHING SHE DID NOT EVEN FULLY COMPREHEND. BUT NOW SHE DOES.
FOR IN ENTERING THE HUMAN CONDITION, SHE HAS EXPERIENCED, SHE HAS GROWN. AND AS ASHEMA HAS LEARNED, SO, TOO, DID HER FELLOW CELESTIALS.
FOR THE PURPOSE OF EXPERIMENTATION IS TO LEARN AND GROW. BUT KNOWLEDGE WITHOUT GROWTH IS A HOLLOW PURSUIT.
AND ULTIMATELY, ASHEMA SACRIFICED HER OWN CONSCIOUSNESS, GAVE IT OVER FOR THE PRESERVATION OF THE OTHER UNIVERSE, WHICH WILL EXIST WITHIN HER FOR ALL TIME.
AND THE OTHER CELESTIALS WILL STUDY HER, FEEL HER, EXPERIENCE HER... INTERNALIZED IN A WAY NEVER BEFORE POSSIBLE SINCE THEY HAD ALWAYS BEEN ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN. THEIR EVOLUTION WILL TAKE EONS. BUT THE CELESTIALS HAVE NOTHING BUT TIME.

YES. THE DREAM OF A GIANT. AND PERHAPS THE CELESTIALS THEMSELVES... ARE MERELY FIGMENTS OF SOMEONE OR SOMETHING ELSE'S ETERNAL IMAGINATION.
INDEED... IN THE FINAL ANALYSIS...
...PERHAPS WE ALL ARE.
END.

HEROES REBORN

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